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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS S/SRMC FARAH PANDITH

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TAGS: PGOV KISL KDEM SCUL EAID SF

SUBJECT: PROMOTING MODERATE ISLAM IN SOUTH AFRICA:

AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH FORMER WESTERN CAPE PREMIER

EBRAHIM RASOOL

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador Donald M. Gips for reasons 1.4  
b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a December 2 courtesy call on the Ambassador, former Western Cape Premier Ebrahim Rasool and his Special Advisor Tahir Saleh discussed South Africa's Western Cape Muslim community as a political base and as a model for a Muslim path of moderation within a culturally diverse society. Rasool commented on his own rise and fall within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and described plans to call on Muslim intellectuals through the "World for All" foundation to look to the Koran for guidance on broadening the intellectual space for Muslims to interact in a secular world. Project proposal to be pouched and e-mailed separately to S/SRMC Farah Pandith. End summary.

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Militant But Non-Violent; Radical But Not Extreme  
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¶2. (C) Introducing himself, Rasool recounted his early days as a pro-democracy activist under apartheid with the United Democratic Front and said he remained a non-violent Islamic militant, a non-fundamentalist revolutionary, and a non-extremist radical. Rasool said the Muslim community of Western Cape, his political base, had succeeded collectively in establishing an "abode of peace" which avoided the dichotomy between the "abode of the faithful" and the "abode of hostility" pushed by some extremists. Rasool claimed that the community's success in charting a middle space for itself within society helped influence the drafting of South Africa's progressive constitution and, he argued, pointed the way toward a new orientation for Islam in the world.

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Pre-empting Fundamentalism by Tackling Crime  
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¶3. (C) Rasool said when he took over as premier of Western Cape (2004), he challenged emerging fundamentalist groups, such as PAGAD, who cleverly marketed extremism as a fight against gangsterism, by making sure the ANC took the lead in the fight against corruption and crime. He told the Ambassador that he also orchestrated the drafting and delivery in every mosque in Western Cape of a sermon denouncing extremism. Rasool recounted the financial, security, and legal measures he took to prevent extremism from securing a foothold in Western Cape. The Ambassador observed that Rasool had let the steam out of an emerging extremist challenge. Rasool agreed, saying his aim had been to make the Western Cape a home for all, a "Dar Amn wa Salaam."

14. (C) Western Cape's success in creating a model of moderate Muslim stability not only attracted investment in the province but also international interest in its particular brand of moderate Muslim leadership, according to Rasool. He said the richness of Cape Islam as it contributes to the range of democratic choices for South Africa was the theme of his two-hour conversation with then-Senator Obama in 2006. He stressed to the Ambassador the importance of distinguishing between assimilation and integration, which he characterized as a situation in which the whole respects the integrity of the parts and the parts contribute to the integrity of the parts and the parts contribute to the integrity of the whole. Rasool said that Cape Muslims had learned to accept multiple identities and had thereby avoided the fate of Muslims who acknowledge only one identity and are willing to die for it.

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Turmoil within Western Cape ANC  
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15. (C) On his fall from grace with the ANC, Rasool said that when "ruptures took place" in 2008 (when the ANC replaced him as Western Cape Premier with Lynne Browne) he had been ready to step aside. In response to the Ambassador's question on what happened, Rasool said that his "redeployment" was due to the fact that the "national majority is a regional minority," suggesting that the ANC's national black majority grew tired of preferences given to the large colored and Muslim

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population in Western Cape. He stressed that those who gravitated to the ANC for leadership opportunities were impatient. He commented that some ANC leaders were suspicious of the growing Muslim investment in Western Cape. Concluding, he said Western Cape's lack of a black middle class resulted in perceived inequalities as white and colored businesses outpaced their black-owned competitors for government contracts. Looking back, Rasool said he had erred by trying to contain all of his political enemies within the provincial cabinet.

6: (SBU) Biographical Note: Ebrahim Rasool served as Premier of Western Cape from 2004 to 2008. He was "redeployed" (i.e. required to resign and accept another position) by the ANC in 2008 and served as an advisor to President Motlanthe until April 2009 elections. Rasool was elected to Parliament in April and served until November 2009, when he was "recalled" (i.e., required to resign) by the ANC following a dispute with other senior Western Cape ANC officials over who was to blame for the party's loss of the province to the Democratic Alliance party. Rasool's tenure was tarnished by allegations of corruption, including alleged payoffs to journalists to write stories harmful to his rivals within the ANC.

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Rededication to Forging a Path for Moderate Islam  
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17. (C) Rasool said a politician cannot always choose when to leave power, but he can choose how to leave. He said he decided to take up a seat in Parliament after losing the premiership to keep his ANC anchor while he began work to establish the "World for All" foundation. In creating the foundation, he said it was his conviction that Islam needs to be "a comfortable shoe." Rasool said he wanted to help Muslims find a way to practice Islam in an environment where they "don't make the rules." According to Rasool, rules established in the Koran were conceived when Muslims were in charge, leaving Muslims with a body of rules that can only fit ideally when "they are the rules that make the world."

Rasool said this situation leaves modern Muslims in a state of perpetual yearning for the place of Islam -- Dar ul-Islam, in which the rule of law is the rule of the Koran.

¶18. (C) Rasool said he is dedicated to helping Muslims find an abode of peace within a tolerant secular state. As an illustration, he said that Muslims in the UK were outraged to learn he supported South Africa's acceptance of civil unions for gays. He had responded to them that, in a secular multi-cultural society, each individual had to follow his own moral code, not try to impose it on others through the law. According to Rasool, "World for All" is an alien concept for much of the Muslim world, but he is encouraged that a tolerant model of Islam is on the rise. Rasool said what is needed is a paradigm shift.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Rasool had been attacked for his views on Islam. Rasool answered that the office had helped him deflect attacks, and he added that his knowledge of the Koranic scripture helped him respond to criticism and explain his ideas on steering a middle ground between orthodoxy and extremism. In contrast, Rasool said Saudi Arabia is not learning to adapt. Rasool argued that Turkey, QArabia is not learning to adapt. Rasool argued that Turkey, by contrast, is adapting "wonderfully." He said Turkish PM Erdogan has strengthened his military's support for EU accession, believing that bringing the military into the EU will help keep it on a democratic path while at the same time undercutting the claims of religious extremists.

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Plans to Sponsor International Colloquium  
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¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked about next steps for the World for All Foundation. Rasool said the Foundation is opening an office in Cape Town January 14-15 and is planning to sponsor an international colloquium in Istanbul. Rasool said the purpose of the colloquium would be to reposition the Ummah (global Islamic community) to overcome inertia and orthodoxy and avoid extremism. He said it is necessary to develop new approaches to Sharia and to debate the relationship between democracy and the rule of law. Rasool said he also wanted to stress tolerance, compassion and solidarity, in part through the messages to raise awareness of the religious holidays of all faiths, a practice he instituted in the Western Cape as

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Premier.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador said the work of building bridges between different faiths is critically important. Rasool credited President Obama for opening space in the world for a new paradigm and said he would be happy to forward an electronic description of the World for All foundation to the appropriate people in Washington. The Ambassador said he welcomed advice from Rasool and Saleh on outreach to the Muslim community in South Africa, particularly the Somali community. Rasool and Saleh assured the Ambassador that they would remain in touch and would be available for consultation at the Ambassador's convenience.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) Rasool is looking for a job following the latest and presumably decisive blow to his political career. Although Rasool is seen within the ANC as compromised politically, his idea to sponsor a "third way" conference for Muslim intellectuals and NGO's may have merit. We remain in contact with Tahir Saleh, who is a longtime friend of the Embassy and former International Visitor grantee and can work with Saleh to pare down the proposal if need be, should there be interest in Washington. End comment.

